

Horse Crazy Little Girl Grows Up to Be World Champion Equestrian

by Suzanne Bush

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A lot of little girls dream about owning a pony. They drive their parents crazy with endless pleas for a pony, or a pony ride, or riding lessons. But not all girls take that childhood passion for equines and turn it into a ticket to compete on an international stage.

"I was one of those horse-crazy little girls and loved horses ever since I could talk," Rebecca Hart says. The Erie native has come a long way from the pony ride she coerced from her parents more than 12 years ago. The ribbons and medals keep piling up, and the 21-year-old was crowned the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) Para-Equestrian National Champion in June, 2006. Hart and her horse, Nordkap, swept the competition in Gladstone, NJ, scoring victories in the Freestyle, the Team Test and the Individual Championship Test.

Amazed at Success

When she reflects on the strange trip that started on that pony, Hart is often amazed at all that has happened. "I figured I'd be the one playing in the fields and having fun," she explains, never thinking that her passion would carry her to the top of international competition. It was the idea of horses that she loved, and she figured that someday she might have her own horse, to ride and enjoy. "I took lessons for about three years (after the pony ride). Then I got my first horse, a slightly crazy Arabian named Eli."

For a few years, Hart competed in hunters against non-disabled riders. "I didn't know the disabled world existed," she says. She saw an article in *Practical Horseman* about para-equestrians, and that changed everything.

"When I got into the disabled world, I switched to dressage," Hart says, and she also got a new horse, Beckon. She has mild spastic paraplegia, which causes muscle wasting and paralysis. "Sometimes I can give the leg cue, and sometimes the message doesn't get through," she says.

Win in Holland

Competing in dressage with Beckon led to a whole new paradigm for Hart. She started winning ribbons against larger and larger fields of competitors. In 2003, Hart borrowed a horse from a friend while competing in Holland. Pippin (show name Norteassa) is a German warmblood. It was another transforming experience for her. She won gold in the Freestyle, and got to

hear the National Anthem. She says that hearing the Star Spangled Banner played in that venue touched her deeply, and stoked her desire to reach higher with her riding. The competition also convinced her that she needed another horse capable of winning at higher levels. She wound up buying Pippin.

"The first show I actually shipped my own horse was in Belgium last year," she says. "It was such a surreal experience. You look at these big gorgeous warmbloods they (the other competitors) ride in on," and it's intimidating. "It's definitely more pressure and more financial strain." But the competition itself was remarkable, not only because she did so well, but because of the audience. "It's an everyday part of life over there. The audience is so knowledgeable," she says. They understand even the most subtle points and respond enthusiastically to the riders and their programs.

Hart finished the FEI Combined Festival of Dressage with a seventh place in the Grade III Individual competition, and fourth place in the Freestyle. She was the top American in the competition.

Started in 70's

The first competition for para-equestrians in dressage started in the 1970s in Scandinavia and Great Britain. The first para-equestrian world championship in dressage was in Sweden in 1987. In 1996 equestrian sports debuted at the Paralympics in Atlanta, with riders from 16 countries. In 2010, para-equestrian sports will make history at the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) World Games in Lexington, KY. This will be the first time ever that the para-equestrian portion of the competition will be incorporated seamlessly into the overall games. In most international competition, the para-equestrian competition occurs after other disciplines have finished.

According to Rob Hinkle, Chief Administrative Officer for the World Games 2010 Foundation, the decision to hold all of the equestrian events together was made in part as a result of Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher's encouragement. Fletcher, noting the historic significance of the change in structure of the games, announced that "for the first time in the history of the FEI Games, not only will the games be held outside Europe, but all eight disciplines will take place in one venue. Our commitment to the games and the magnificent facilities at the Kentucky Horse Park will allow the para-equestrian portion of the games to be held simultaneously with other disciplines for the first time ever."

2010 Games

While Hart is looking forward to competing for a spot in the 2010 FEI Games, another major competition occupies her thoughts these days. "Right now, we're looking at going to the National Trials in May," she says, although she has petitioned for a bye. If her request for a bye is approved, then she'll

focus all her efforts on training for the World Championship in July in Great Britain.

Looking ahead to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (the equestrian competition will be held in Hong Kong), Hart is eager to add "Olympian" to her already-impressive resume. Meanwhile, she is balancing a job, school and riding, along with the stresses that come with horses and competition. Measuring the distance from the horse-crazy little girl to the international competitor who is also a full-time college student, you have to wonder if there's a champion lurking in every rider—waiting for the right combination of commitment and desire to set that champion free. Hart will graduate in 2008, and anticipates a future that will include horses as well as work. "Horses are in my blood. I'll be working with them until the day I die."